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AUTHOR Rogers, Sue F.  
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ABSTRACT

This research reports results of a survey of content area educators who completed an in-service content area reading course in May 2000. Educators completed two surveys, one each year following the course to determine the most effective content area strategies utilized during the two years following the course. In the surveys, teachers reported students' high stakes tests were high, student grades were better, and teachers were more organized. The second year, teachers reported more use of short classroom activities and less use of activities requiring students to work for long periods of time using critical thinking skills. Teachers in future classes will need to add their input to help them develop long-range assessment plans so teachers can continue to alter instruction as they see trends developing in their students' academic needs. An attached appendix includes the two teacher surveys. (Author/RS)

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**Running head: EFFECTIVE CONTENT AREA READING STRATEGIES**

**Freedom to Choose: Effective Content Area Reading Strategies Teachers Continue  
To Utilize the Second Year After an In-service Course**

**Sue F. Rogers, Ed.D.  
Professor Education  
Averett University  
420 West Main Street  
Danville, Virginia 24541  
Office (434) 7915753  
FAX (434) 791-5020  
Email: srogers@averett.edu**

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S. F. Rogers

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### **Abstract**

This research reports results of a survey of content area educators who completed an in-service content area reading course in May 2000. Educators completed two surveys, one each year following the course to determine the most effective content area strategies utilized during the two years following the course. In the surveys, teachers reported students' high stakes tests results were higher, student grades were better, and teachers were more organized. The second year, teachers reported more use of short classroom activities and less use of activities requiring students to work for longer periods of time using critical thinking skills.

## **Freedom to Choose: Effective Content Area Reading Strategies Teachers Continue To Utilize the Second Year After an In-service Course**

### **Introduction**

In a recent email, a teacher requested a handout that he had received in an in-service course but had “misplaced.” Now, he needed it in his new teaching position. Teachers are constantly attending numerous in-service courses and workshops throughout careers to satisfy new requirements in the school system or state. But, how many educators really use the info learned in a required course, especially one taken two nights weekly over a four-week period in May? Lyons and Pinnell (2001) state in their text, Systems for change in literacy: A guide to professional development, that teacher educators put forth considerable efforts to benefit educators but find few real changes are made. I began to wonder if my teachers were benefiting from the Content Area Reading Course that I taught each May and more importantly, I wanted to know if their students were benefiting! And, if so, would teachers continue using strategies learned? Thus, began this two-year study!

### **Background**

Since 1999, my university’s teacher education program has added a state mandated course in Content Area Reading for secondary teachers’ certification. This change delighted the reading faculty in our teacher education program since we had

wanted this requirement added for years! Another initial aspect of this state mandate is that one of our partnership school systems requested that we offer this course for their new teachers, including a number who were recent career-switchers still working on their initial certification. Also, the school system encouraged those seeking re-certification to enroll in the course. Thus, a mixed group of experienced and new teachers showed up for the course in May 2000.

A new format for the after school class included discussion and lecture followed by computer lab work during the two nights per week, four and one-half hours per night, for the four weeks of the course. The teachers were very positive on their end of course evaluations—an immediate response. They indicated they liked the course format as well as the helpful strategies they were learning to use. Since this course was scheduled at the end of their academic year, they saw so many possibilities to improve on their teaching and spent much time in preparation for what they were going to do with their classes of students in the next school year.

One of their course assignments was to write a syllabus for a class they were currently teaching and use for the remainder of the current year. It included the state's curriculum Standards of Learning (Virginia, 1996) to be studied weekly as well as the topics and assignments with due dates for each week. Also, teachers taught three lessons for the course utilizing a variety of strategies from brief brainstorming activities at the beginning of lessons to motivate and assess students' content knowledge as well as their vocabulary, reading and listening comprehension, written expression, organization/study skills and computer skills for student engagement and development when utilizing texts and other resources (Eanes, 1997, Richardson and Morgan, 2000 and Vacca and Vacca,

1999). For each lesson plan, the teacher included a rubric so their students would know how they were to be graded and thus, what was important (Rogers and Riedel, 1999). Then, teachers evaluated the success of the lesson plan by stating the number of students earning each quality level of grade and listing future plans to help the low achievers to upgrade their skills/knowledge in areas needed.

Purpose and rationale. During the course, the class members maintained a very positive attitude and many remained in the computer lab for hours working on assignments. They shared info and helped each other. They reported successes and failures in their lessons while struggling with designing and utilizing rubrics (They were graded on a rubric that was part of their course syllabus and evaluated that highly in the course evaluation!). But, will the newly learned strategies become part of their lessons in the next and future school years and if utilized, will their students benefit academically as measured on the high stakes state's Standards of Learning tests? To aid the process, the final requirement in the course was for teachers to develop the next year's syllabus with each week planned including the state standards to be studied that week, the topic and the assignments. They were cautioned to build extra time into their syllabus for the infinite number of instructional opportunities and interruptions that occur each year. Also, teachers were encouraged to add extra resources, alter as needed throughout the year and to post the syllabus for one marking period or for a week on the school's web site for parents and students to refer! Thus, the teachers had a plan to incorporate newly learned materials and instructional strategies into the next year's lessons. But, would they use it?

When researching available literature for studies concerning strategies teachers, in general, seem to utilize the most and with what student success after completing an in-

service content area reading course, no studies were located in recent years. Thus, began a two-year research project, which was arranged and briefly discussed with the class before the course ended. The teachers knew that a survey with a self-addressed envelope to the instructor would arrive in their mail each year for the next two years of the study.

## Method

### Participants

Twenty teachers from five school systems and one private school enrolled in the content area reading course representing a variety of content areas. The general teaching areas were math, English, science, business, special education—both high school and elementary levels, social studies, English as a second language, elementary grades and preschool. Thus, the course included teachers from all levels of schools and from more school systems than the one that had requested the course.

### Survey Instrument

The survey instrument shown in the Appendix, consists of two questions on syllabus use (numbers 1 and 2), two questions on study guides (numbers 4 and 5), two on assessment and evaluation (numbers 6 and 7), one on organization (number 8), two on the course evaluation (numbers 9 and 10), one for comments (number 11) and one question (number 3) on lesson plans. The lesson plan question listed 20 items, most were on instructional strategies, assessment and evaluation procedures, and for teachers to mark if they included them in their lesson plans. For the second year, Survey II had an additional question on the end of year high stakes state curriculum tests, which had been administered at the end of the first year after Survey I was completed; thus, it could not

be a part of Survey I. Questions 1-10 and 12 (Survey II only) called for teachers to marked if used: 1) not at all, 2) some of the time or 3) most of the time. The eleventh question was open ended for teachers to write comments.

### Procedures

At the end of the May course, teachers self-addressed two envelopes with the understanding that each January over the next two years they would receive one of their envelopes containing a cover letter, a survey and a stamped envelope addressed to the course instructor. The cover letter indicated the survey info would be used for refinement of future content area courses and would be reported in the professor's research reports (oral and written) but, all of the educators' personal identifying info would remain anonymous. When surveys were returned results were tallied.

## Results

### Data Analysis

The survey and tallies for the two surveys' items are shown in the Appendix. Educators' responses are represented as percentages; items receiving 50% (percentages are rounded off) or more of occurrences are considered to be majority respondents. Fourteen of the twenty teachers or 70% returned Survey I. Percentages are based on the 14 respondents and are listed outside of the parentheses beside each item in the appropriate column rating. Ten educators or 50% of the teachers returned Survey II. However, one survey was not completed and that educator wrote that he was now a school administrator without a classroom of students to use the course material, so he did not complete the survey. Therefore, the tenth survey was not included in the Survey II



percentages and percentages are based on the remaining nine respondents and are listed within parentheses beside each item.

### Syllabus

The first two questions dealt with use of the syllabus. Although a majority of teachers did not respond to the statement “I have used my syllabus,” a majority did report that their students used the syllabus some of the time or year and this number increased during the second year. If a majority of teachers reported their students are using the syllabus part of the time or year, then why did the teachers not report using it in the same proportion? One possible explanation is that the question was on the first line of the survey, which also included info on the three ratings. Perhaps the ratings info distracted the respondents from question one so they began marking with the second question. However, not only do a majority of students appear to be using their syllabus some of the time but a larger majority during the second year following the course.

### Lesson Plans

Most Utilized Items. When asked to indicate the frequency of occurrence in their lesson plans for 20 items, a majority of teachers responded in both Surveys with the number of responses increasing during the second year for most of the time usage of four items in their lesson plans. The items included were 1) the state’s Standards of Learning, 2) objective products for students to produce, 3) vocabulary instruction activities (activities needing the teacher’s in-class help) and 4) a grading scale for evaluation. A fifth item, incorporated extra literature and other materials to compliment the text and add to students’ understanding, did not receive a majority of respondents in Survey I but did in Survey II. These majority percentages indicate that teachers are using the state

curriculum guidelines more and are requiring students to produce products to prove knowledge with specific plans for how to grade the students' products included in lessons. Also, teachers appear to be adding materials and using more activities to interact with students to enhance instruction and student learning.

Five items increasingly used most of the time by a higher percentage of teachers in Survey II but still not a majority, were the 1) KWL chart, 2) graphic organizer, 3) visual imagery, 4) cloze for vocabulary instruction and 5) rubrics. Thus, their overall usage appeared to become more frequent. The first four strategies can be utilized at the beginning of lessons for activation of existing knowledge and for teacher assessment of student knowledge and at the end of lessons for review and assessment of what has been learned but are not the recommended instructional strategies primarily used for development of critical thinking skills for information in the content areas (Richardson and Morgan, 2000). Thus, respondents indicated in the higher most utilized items, that they are involved in interactive activities with students with beginning, instructional and assessment activities and students are more involved in their own learning outcomes with rubrics.

Seven items went down in popularity from the first year to the second: 1) vocabulary paraphrasing (Glazer), 2) written expression, 3) hands-on activities and 4) modified lessons for inclusion students. And three items, 5-6) study guides for reading and listening assignments and 7) recorded daily results with plans for poor performers, did not receive any--most of the time--frequency during the second year. The study guides, writing, hands-on activities and daily evaluations and work with poor performers are very involved and interactive instructional activities requiring a longer time period to

complete, due to more organized work, more independent reading, writing and listening work, and thus, critical thinking for students. In addition, these activities require teachers to spend more time in instructional and planning for poor performers. On the other hand, teaching a lesson's initial and concluding activities such as the KWL, graphic organizer and vocabulary activities require shorter time periods for students to focus on each topic. Also, these shorter activities require more teacher-led instruction with teacher-completed products and less independent student organization and student completed products of assignments.

Items Used Some of the Time. In Survey II, a majority of teachers reported using 9/20 items on lesson plans some of the time. Five areas received higher percentages during the second year which were 1-2) use of reading and listening study guides for assignments, 3) written expression work, 4) hands-on activities and 5) modifying lessons for inclusion students. All of these areas had lower frequency usage noted in the "most of the time" rating. Thus, even though these methods were reported to be used some, that was a lower frequency of usage during the second year following the course than had been true for the first year. Four of these activities, reading and listening study guides, written expression work and hands-on activities require students to think through an assignment over a longer period of time and all require teachers to spend time in preparation and to work closely with students to help them complete their products. Even though they are used some of the time by a majority of teachers, this represents a reduction from the first year use of the strategies that would be time consuming for preparation and focus the thinking of students to help them work through information in content area study. Why was lower use indicated? Did the teachers find these activities

not to be as helpful or were they more difficult to teach? Were there other school or system imposed activities that took precedence over the content area course strategies during year two?

The last item receiving a majority percentage of teachers' responses using some of the time was recording daily results with plans for poor performers, which had only 1% difference of usage at this rating from Survey I. Since there are not any used "most of the time" respondents in Survey II and there was in Survey I, this seems to indicate a general decrease in use of daily assessment and instructional plans for poor performers, which can be time-consuming for a busy teacher.

Not at all or no response. The "not at all" rating or no response to the item was not listed for any item by a majority of teachers for the 20 lesson plan items. However, two items had mixed responses. For the use of 1) three types of questions and 2) on recording weekly lesson results with plans to further instruct poor performers, Survey I did not have any "not at all" or no responses and Survey II did. It seems, even though a higher percentage of teachers responded in the "most of the time" rating for both items, overall, some teachers are simply not incorporating a variety of question types or evaluating weekly lesson plans and planning extra instruction to work with the poor performers into their lessons.

#### Study guides, assessment, evaluation and organization

For question four, on study guides aiding students who had been absent, and question five, on study guides aiding students for test study, a majority of teachers did not respond in any rating. However, the number of teachers stating that the study guide aided

absentee students appears to be decreasing in frequency from year one to year two. Percentages of teachers having students aided when using study guides to study for tests has decreased from aiding students most of the time to an increase in some of the time. Thus, the study guide help for absentee students for the second year is down as is usage of study guides aiding students when studying for tests.

There was not a majority of responses to question six on use of portfolios; however, teachers did indicate that more students were keeping a portfolio some of the time during the second year.

For question seven, 86% of the teachers responded that overall their students' grades are better either some (50%) or most (36%) of the time the first year and this number increase during the second year to 100% of the teachers reporting improvement some (67%) or most (33%) of the time! Apparently, all of teachers see a positive difference in their students' grades two years after the course!

One of the highest frequency ratings for the entire survey was for question eight with 93% of the teachers responding that their instructional organization has improved most or some of the time the first year and 100% of the teachers reporting this during the second year.

For questions four through eight, it seems that teachers know their students grades are better, their instruction is more organized and more students are keeping portfolios some of the time. Finally, study guides used to aid students when studying for tests at least some of the time and to help absentee students do not seem to be utilized as much during the second year following the course.

#### Course evaluations

In question nine, teachers agreed that most of the time they now spend more time in lesson planning, instruction and evaluation than before taking the content area reading course! Also, in question ten, they overwhelmingly rated the course useful most of the time (93%) not only to them in their teaching but to their students' accomplishments! Thus, teachers seem to feel they do work longer now but are using the info learned as they think it is helping their students!

There were 11 or 71% of educators writing comments on the open ended question eleven, which solicited their input in the Survey I. Ten were positive indicating teachers and students had benefited, especially when using vocabulary activities, the syllabus, and that extra lesson planning was needed but "worth it!" For Survey II, only 44% or four educators commented and all were general but positive statements.

The final question added to Survey II asked about the high stakes state tests scores taken by students at the end of the first year following the content area reading course but after Survey I had been completed and returned. There was not a majority of responses in any category, but, 44% said "most of the time," 33% said "some of the time," and 22% did not respond. Thus, it seems that most or 77% of teachers responding reported that students' high stakes state test scores did improve some or most of the time.

## Discussion

### Interpretation

Data from the two surveys are indicative of trends and a number of conclusions. The first three conclusions are not only reported by a majority of respondents but the number of educators increased during year two; thus, a positive trend of more use two years following the course completion is indicated.

1) Teachers are making more efforts to align lessons and state curricula with objective products and establishing a grading system in lesson plans as well as incorporating extra materials and literature to help students with understanding the material.

2) Teachers are using interactive vocabulary instruction activities to aid students' content vocabulary.

3) Teachers are spending more time in planning, instructing and evaluating students.

4) Although it still received a majority of responses, there is a decreasing percentage from "most" to "some of the time," but still, all teachers during year two of the study reported that their instructional organizational has improved and consider the Content Area Reading course to have been useful in their teaching and to their students' accomplishments.

The following conclusions and trends were indicated by respondents with decreasing percentages from "most of the time" or using "some of the time" or increases in "no response" or "not at all" in their teaching thus bringing down the frequency of usage.

5) During year two, teachers are decreasing their use of instructional procedures requiring students to produce products that take more in focused thought and longer time periods to complete such as in written expression, vocabulary paraphrasing, reading and listening comprehension assignments or for using study guides to aid students that had been absent or when studying for tests and hands-on activities.

6) For year two, teachers do not appear to be modifying lessons for inclusion students, recording daily evaluation of lessons and making specific plans to instruct poor performers, as frequently as during the first year.

The following trends and conclusions were indicated by respondents with increasing percentages of use from “no response” or “not at all” to using “some” and/or “most of the time” during year two.

7) During year two teachers seem to be increasing in use of teacher-student interactive strategies requiring shorter durations of time to complete and to get quick student responses such as pre-lesson motivation, activating background knowledge, organizational, or assessment activities such as the KWL, graphic organizer, visual imagery and cloze activities for vocabulary instruction.

8) Students appear to be increasing their involvement and responsibilities and assignment outcomes by utilizing course syllabi, portfolios and rubrics more.

9) All respondents seem to feel their students’ grades are continuing to improve during year two.

10) Teachers reported that state test scores improved at the end of the first full year following the course.

### Implications

Cautions are needed in interpreting this study’s info as it is very limited study completed on a small number of local educators in five school systems within close proximity of a university. The info gathered over a two-year period needs further research to verify the indications. However, there are two implications for teacher



educators to consider when teaching a content area reading course for teachers' professional development.

Since many instructional strategies listed on the survey appear to be helpful in Survey 1 resulting in higher state test scores at the end of year one, the question becomes: will the students' high stakes state test scores continue to improve with the decreasing use of written expression and careful reading and listening study guides and hands-on instruction work? These activities require students to spend more time in completing a product using critical thinking, thereby working through an assignment and not just contributing to a quick teacher-led activity/product such as a KWL chart used at the beginning and end of a lesson by the teacher. These quick teacher-led activities are important and serve definite purposes in the lesson but are not to be used in-place of focused critical-thinking activities where students produce completed and thought-through products. In order to emphasize the importance of utilizing strategies to develop critical and in-depth thinking, the instructor has implemented plans to switch text to utilize one that will direct educators to the importance to not only use shorter teacher led activities, but to emphasize usage of focused longer in time and in-depth critical thinking activities and reflection activities to follow up lessons. Hopefully, this will help students keep on task from the beginning through critical thinking activities in learning development.

In future content area reading courses, this instructor will implement plans to discuss this study and plan with teachers to help them make the most of their professional development course by continuing to evaluate and use activities that seem to help students improve critical thinking, grades and high stakes state test scores. The instructor

plans to follow Lyons and Pinnell's (2001) suggestions of using faculty study groups and action research groups to help faculty use assessment data to stay motivated year after year so as to create a dynamic teaching environment. Teachers in future classes will need to add their input for the instructor to help them develop a long-range assessment plans to use in evaluating what is more effective for their students so teachers can continue to alter instruction as they see trends developing in their students' academic needs and assets in the content areas.

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## Appendix

# TEACHER SURVEYS: I AND II for CONTENT AREA READING--ED 534 TEACHERS—MAY 2000

Place an X in the box in the column most representing your opinion. The rating system is as follows:

Column 1=not at all      Column 2=some of the time/year

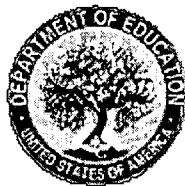
Column 3=most of the time/year

All numbers in parentheses are for Survey II. All other numbers are for Survey I.

1. I have used my syllabus (no response percentages will be in this column)----- ----- 64(56)%	1=not at all	2=some of the time/yr 21(22)%	3=most of the time/yr 14(22)%
2. My students use the syllabus-----14%	14(11)%	64(78)%	7(11)%
3. MY LESSON PLANS INCLUDE:			
SOL	14(11)%	21(11)%	64(78)%
Objective products-0(11)%	7%	35(22)%	57(67)%
KWL	0(11)%	86(56)%	14(33)%
Graphic organizer	0(11)%	79(56)%	21(33)%
Visual imagery ----- -----7(11)%	14(11)%	71(33)%	7(44)%
Cloze (for Vocabulary instruction)-----14%	0(11)%	57(56)%	29(33)%
Vocabulary instruction activities (w/ teacher help on instruction)-0(11)%		43(22)%	57(67)%
Vocabulary paraphrasing	14%	50(33)%	36(33)%

work-0(33)%			
Vocabulary practice activities (w/o teacher help)	7(11)%	50(44)%	43(44)%
Study guides for reading assignments-0(11)%	14%	50(89)%	36%
The 3 types of questions are used for assignments and tests-0(11)%	0(22)%	71(22)%	29(44)%
Study guides for listening assignments-7(22)%	36(22)%	29(56)%	29%
Written expression Work-0(11)%	21(11)%	36(67)%	43(11)%
Hands-on activities		43(56)%	57(44)%
Incorporated extra literature book, etc. to compliment the textbook and add to students' understanding of material.	7(22)%	64(22)%	29(56)%
Modified lessons for inclusion students-7(22)%	7%	29(56)%	57(22)%
Rubrics-----7%	14(11)%	64(44)%	14(44)%
Grading scales	7%	43(11)%	50(89)%
Recorded daily results with plans for poor performers-0(11)%	7(11)%	79(78)%	14%
Recorded weekly lesson results with plans for poor performers-0(11)%	0(11)%	79(44)%	21(33)%
4. Study guides aided	29(33)%	36(22)%	36(11)%

students who had been absent-0(33)%			
5. Study guides aided students when studying for tests-----14(22)%	14%	21(33)%	50(44)%
6. My students keep a portfolio----- 7%	29(22)%	29(44)%	36(33)%
7. Overall my students' grades are better.	14%	50(67)%	36(33)%
8. My instructional organization has improved.	7%	0(33)%	93(67)%
9. Overall, as a result of the Ed 534 teaching strategies studied, I now spend MORE TIME in lesson planning, instruction and evaluation-----7%		36(33)%	57(67)%
10. I consider the ED 534 course in Content Area Reading to have been USEFUL in my teaching and to my students' accomplishments.		7(11)%	93(89)%
11. Comments: (Please write below or on back any comments you may have) -----21(56)%	7% NEGATIVE)	71(44)% POSITIVE)	
12. St. tests improved after course-(22%)		(33%)	(44%)



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